

Talking to God sermon series

Sermon 5 – Prayers from the Cross

Luke 23:33-36; Mark 15: 33-36; Luke 23:44-46

March 29, 2009

If you take into account all four gospels, Jesus speaks from the cross seven different times. Three of those seven are prayers which were included in the selections of scripture I read today. They are three very different prayers, but I believe they capture the totality of what Jesus was feeling during his time on the cross.

This morning we finish our sermon series on prayer at the most appropriate place: at the cross, at the end of Jesus' life. We've looked his teachings about prayer, listened to his parables, and eavesdropped on his own prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane. But now we're going to stand at the foot of the cross and listen to Jesus as he says his final words.

I often get asked the questions, "If Jesus was God, was he praying to himself?" or "If Jesus was God, did God die on the cross?" Geez, what do I look like, a minister? The prevailing belief is that Jesus is the only person in the history of existence who was both fully human and fully divine. It's reflected in his name: Jesus (his given earthly name) and Christ (which means "messiah" or "anointed one"). Jesus' full humanity means that he knows how it feels to be one of us, and everything he experienced, even on the cross, he experienced as a human being. Jesus' full divinity means he was truly one with God, that through him God came to earth to dwell among us, and that the promises Jesus makes are divine promises.

Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, and at different times during his life and ministry he was living out those two aspects. For example, at times he forgives sins, which was believed to be an action only God could do. He performs miraculous healings and commands demons to flee. That's the divinity of Jesus at work. At other times we see Jesus displaying a full range of human emotions and feelings: anger, grief, compassion. He worked as a carpenter, he wore clothes and ate meals. When he prayed in Gethsemane for God to take this cup from him, his was at his most human. Jesus was both fully divine and fully human.

That has implications for how we hear Jesus' words from the cross. When he proclaims to the thief that he will be with Jesus in paradise, that's a divine promise. But I believe all three of Jesus' prayers are offered out of his humanity, his total human experience of the crucifixion. That's important because if we are to believe that Jesus truly knows what it's like to suffer, we have to believe he truly suffered. And that's the only way we can learn about prayer. When I'm going through my own dark times in my life, I have to know that Jesus felt what I feel in order for his prayers to make sense to me.

The first prayer we have is Jesus asking for forgiveness for those who have crucified him. That's a hard one. I had a great conversation with someone this past week on the issue of forgiveness. If someone has wronged me in a painful and egregious way, is forgiveness even possible? Here Jesus is, hands and feet nailed to a cross, asking God to forgive those who drove the spikes and signed his death warrant. Praying for forgiveness sounds like a noble thing to do until you're the one who has to do the forgiving. Then we don't want the power to be merciful; we want justice. Yet it's very tempting for a prayer for justice to become a prayer for vengeance. Jesus realized that those who sinned against him didn't need God's wrath as much as they needed God's mercy.

So are we to pray in the same way, asking for God to forgive those who wrong us? I wish it were that easy, but we are not Jesus. And yet that shouldn't stop us from working toward a

spirit of forgiveness in our own lives toward others, because of what God has done for us. You see, when Jesus says, “Forgive them, because they don’t know what they are doing,” he wasn’t just talking about the Pharisees and the Roman soldiers. He was talking about you and me, as well. The Lenten season is a sobering reminder that we are as in need of a Savior as anyone. We work toward forgiveness because we have been forgiven, and our prayers to God, especially during our darkest times, should reflect that. Forgiveness of others may not come easy, but it is better to spend out lives working toward forgiveness than to live life harboring resentment against someone else.

The compassion of Jesus’ first prayer from the cross is a stark contrast to his second one: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” To put it in more modern terms, “Where are you, God? Don’t you see what I’m going through? Have you forgotten about me down here?” When we feel like asking those questions, we are taking our place alongside Jesus, who also felt forgotten by God.

And yet, even in the midst of his anguish, there’s something to learn from Jesus about prayer. First, it’s important to note that even though Jesus is at the lowest point in his life, the point when he felt the furthest from God, he still cries out “My God, my God.” This is a cry of distress, not a cry of distrust. It demonstrates a baseline belief that there is a God, even if God doesn’t feel close. To pray is to affirm your belief in God’s existence, whether or not God feels particularly present at that moment in time. The irony of Jesus’ painful prayer is that it’s a sign of great intimacy with God.

Jesus is quoting here from Psalm 22, a psalm of lament that expresses pain at the feeling of abandonment. Not just pain, but anger. The psalmist writes, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day but you do not answer.” There is nothing polite or reserved about what Jesus is doing here. This is raw emotion that Jesus is showing.

I’m thankful for that. Because regardless of my theology about God’s goodness or my belief about how much God loves me, there are times in life when I feel like I *have* been forsaken, like God *is* so far from me. What Jesus’ prayer tells me is that it’s OK not only to feel this, but to express it in no uncertain terms. When we have relationship with someone, there are going to be times when there is strife or conflict. To express that to God directly is a testament to the strength of our faith. If Jesus, in his most human moment, was capable of questioning God’s faithfulness, I think we should be afforded the same opportunity.

It’s often when we express our grief or anger or sorrow that God’s presence becomes most palpable to us. Henri Nouwen writes, “When God’s absence was most loudly expressed, God’s presence was most profoundly revealed.” Psalm 22 goes on to say, “I will declare God’s name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise God. For God has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; God has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.” When we cry to God about feeling forsaken, God hears us and responds, “Remember Jesus? I know what you are going through and I am with you.”

The last prayer Jesus offers from the cross are his last words and an appropriate ending to his life: “Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit.” The first recorded words of Jesus in the gospels were when he was found in the temple and says to his parents, “Don’t you know that I had to be about my father’s business?” And now that business is finished.

Notice in these last words there were no curses from his mouth. Instead, he ends his life with a prayer of faith, the same prayer that Jewish mothers taught their children to say at bedtime every night. In the end, he’s in God’s hands. Other hands have beaten him with a whip, pushed a

crown of thorns onto his head, slapped him, shoved him. But those hands don't have the last word. Now he is in God's hands.

Jesus' last prayer for the cross is act of submission, not unlike Jesus' prayer in the garden that God's will be done. It is only when Jesus hands over his life to God that God is able to bring about redemption and resurrection. Jesus finishes his business, gives his spirit to God and trusts in God's transformative powers. That's an important prayer to remember for those of us who are subject other powers in our lives. Some may have thought that when Jesus said these words and died, the powers of evil had won. The Romans had won. The mob that shouted "Crucify him!" had won. But when Jesus surrendered himself to God, he ensured that none of those powers would have the last word. God would have the last word.

When we face difficult times, even death, we may feel that God is far off and the dark side is winning. But what Jesus' prayer tells us is that evil doesn't win. Cancer doesn't win. The drunk driver doesn't win. Death doesn't win. When we submit our spirit, God wins. God has the last word.

As I've said before, prayer is not about bending God's will to ours, but submitting ourselves to God's will. That's not something we have to wait until the end of our lives to do. Each day we can commend ourselves to God's hands, asking God to have the last word in our lives, submitting ourselves to God's restoring presence and transformative power. Jesus died so that in our lives, God would win.

As we move closer to Good Friday, there's one more observation to make about Jesus' prayers from the cross, and that is the fact that, during his darkest time, during his hour of death, Jesus prayed to his Heavenly Father, to his God. We are called to pray, to talk to God, to share our fears, our anger, our joy, our pain. Even when God feels furthest away, even when we don't know if anyone's listening, we are called to pray. We pray because Jesus prayed, and from his prayers came the hope and joy of Easter. Prayer carries with it the power to resurrect, the power to illuminate the darkness of our lives with the promise of new life. Prayer helps us make sense of our often senseless lives. As Christians, we pray because we believe we are heard. Thanks be to God.